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# The role of social actors in building sustainable cities in the Global South

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**Introduction:** Public sector institutions must utilize public policies effectively to deliver essential programs and services designed to tackle pressing community issues. The pervasive housing shortages have created significant distress surrounding asset acquisition, housing finance, property dynamics, affordable housing, and community development.

**Methodology:** Adopting a qualitative methodology, the paper using the systematic review rigorously analysed the contributions of social actors in fostering sustainable communities and elevating the living standards of residents. The PRISMA assisted in identifying sources that can be included or excluded in the study for relevance, credibility, and methodological rigor. This diligent search encompassed literature published between 2005 and 2024, using academic databases, including EBSCO, SCOPUS, Google Scholar, Web of Science, ProQuest, Springer, and Science Direct. Furthermore, the inclusion of grey literature and registry sources enriched the inquiry with diverse conceptual perspectives.

**Results:** A total of 113 records emerged 80 from databases, 20 from registers, and 13 from additional sources like manual searches and unpublished materials. Leveraging social identity theory highlights the importance of individual identification with collective groups that share common interests. The findings unequivocally indicate that robust mechanisms are necessary to allow individuals in need of housing to align themselves with policy concerned groups devoted to building sustainable cities and enriching citizens' quality of life.

**Discussion:** This paper decisively assesses the critical role of social actors in constructing sustainable cities that aim to enhance the quality of life for marginalized communities. Active participation in public policy processes is not just beneficial but essential for these community members, enabling them to secure improvements that would be unattainable without their engaged involvement. The paper strongly recommends that social actors engaged in housing challenges take the initiative to advocate for legislative changes that unequivocally benefit their constituents with shared goals.

## KEYWORDS

community engagement, Global South, social actors, sustainable cities, social identity theory

## Introduction

Community engagement is essential in the pursuit of sustainable cities, demanding active involvement from residents in decision-making processes that address their needs and concerns directly. This involvement leads to more effective and targeted interventions that significantly enhance the quality of life for impoverished communities. By fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility, community engagement promotes sustainable development. Among the various sectors involved in this mission, community engagement stands out as fundamentally vital. It

embodies the collaborative effort of individuals and social groups to tackle problems affecting their lives, encompassing activities from consultation and participation to empowerment and partnerships. Such engagement is a cornerstone of development projects, enabling effective advocacy for local populations and ensuring their unique needs are prioritized (Koh, 2024). The participation of diverse social actors enriches the public sphere, driving equitable resource distribution and bolstering social inclusion within urban sustainability initiatives. Their involvement is critical in ensuring these initiatives reflect a broad range of perspectives, fostering inclusivity, and addressing the needs of all community segments (Fenton and Gustafsson, 2017).

The sustainability of urban environments is significantly enhanced when local communities actively engage in addressing urban challenges. This creates a vital sense of ownership over sustainability initiatives, which is crucial for fostering long-term commitment and engagement. Research by Cheema (2020) demonstrates that social actors substantially influence governance processes through their active participation. This involvement is not merely beneficial; it is essential for promoting accountability and transparency, ensuring that marginalized communities are adequately represented. The collaboration of social actors in local decision-making is a powerful mechanism that strengthens urban sustainability initiatives and addresses existing gaps among various agencies (Cheema, 2020). Thus, it is imperative to establish participatory mechanisms within governmental frameworks to enhance citizens' quality of life. This approach fosters an inclusive strategy that emphasizes collaborative transformative governance, as highlighted by Mvuyana and Nzimakwe (2024). They assert the urgent need for structured engagement rooted in integrated participation to mitigate conflicts between policymakers and residents.

Consequently, a comprehensive reform of citizen engagement institutions is not just desirable; it is necessary. There must be a focus on identifying stakeholders for programs designed to elevate residents' quality of life. Rodrigues (2018) argues that the foundation of sustainable cities lies in having a capable local government that effectively implements policies impacting residents' living conditions. The literature indisputably reveals that marginalized communities in the Global South face systematic exclusion from top-down urban planning processes. It is critical to involve social actors in decision-making to ensure their needs are prioritized, thereby promoting social equity and reducing inequalities. When local governments decisively prioritize sustainable practices, they create environments that substantially enhance individual well-being and overall satisfaction among the population. A recent study by Madell (2024) emphasizes that countries in the Global South have implemented comprehensive housing policies and legislation aimed at supporting access to housing for the urban poor. Furthermore, the scholar highlights that the development of housing policies, legislation, and directives must be context-specific, appropriate, and aware of the impacts of private sector property investment decisions on vulnerable communities. Simone's groundbreaking research conducted in 2020 on the Cities of the Global South decisively introduces the concept of reterritorialisation. It emphasizes that, in the face of global pressures, local actors unapologetically shape urban landscapes through vibrant popular economies, which encompass informal, community-driven systems of survival and exchange. Practices such as self-construction, informal markets, and community infrastructure powerfully demonstrate agency and resilience. Consequently, this dynamism fuels urban protests and social movements that boldly reassert claims to space and governance, particularly among youth (Simone, 2020). This study rigorously examines the critical role of social actors in building sustainable cities in the Global South.

## Research methodology

The article employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to critically assess the significant role of social actors in shaping sustainable cities in the Global South. An SLR is an established research methodology that systematically collects, identifies, and analyses existing studies—including articles, conference proceedings, books, and legislation—through a structured and rigorous approach (Pati and Lorusso, 2018). This review effectively updates readers on the current state of literature about this important subject. Its primary objective is to thoroughly evaluate essential aspects of contemporary knowledge on key research questions while also highlighting areas that require further investigation (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022). The qualitative systematic review employed in the study showcased a comprehensive search strategy that illuminated the vital exploration of social actors in sustainable cities within the Global South. This diligent search encompassed literature published between 2005 and 2024, traversing a multitude of academic databases, including EBSCO, SCOPUS, Google Scholar, Web of Science, ProQuest, Springer, and Science Direct. Furthermore, the inclusion of gray literature and registry sources enriched the inquiry with diverse conceptual perspectives. A total of 113 records emerged: 80 from databases, 20 from registers, and 13 from additional sources like manual searches and unpublished materials. In the preliminary stages, 40 records were thoughtfully removed—20 due to duplication, 10 deemed ineligible by automation tools, and 10 excluded for challenges such as inaccessible formats or incomplete metadata. This careful curation led to 73 records being screened for titles and abstracts, with 9 set aside for not aligning conceptually with the research question. Full texts were pursued for 64 records, though 5 remained elusive due to access constraints. The remaining 59 full-text studies were critically evaluated against inclusion criteria that emphasized thematic richness, methodological transparency, and significance to the role of social actors in urban sustainability. In this rigorous evaluation, 10 studies were excluded for reasons such as misalignment with the research focus ( $n = 3$ ), inadequate methodological reporting ( $n = 2$ ), insufficient qualitative depth ( $n = 2$ ), or other context-specific challenges ( $n = 3$ ). At the end, a total of 49 studies shone through to be included in the qualitative synthesis. These studies were meticulously analyzed to uncover key patterns, conceptual frameworks, and emerging narratives that highlight the transformative role of social actors in shaping sustainable urban environments across the Global South. The review process below adhered to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, ensuring a commitment to transparent reporting in this significant endeavor. The reviewed literature has contributed to a nuanced understanding of the critical role the social actors play in promoting sustainable urban development aimed at improving living conditions in the Global South. Furthermore, it has highlighted existing gaps that these social actors are uniquely positioned to address in the pursuit of sustainable urban environments (Figure 1).

## Theoretical framework

### Social identity theory

The Social Identity Theory (SIT), as articulated by Gaffney and Hogg (2023), underscores the critical importance of group identification, asserting that individuals derive their sense of self from

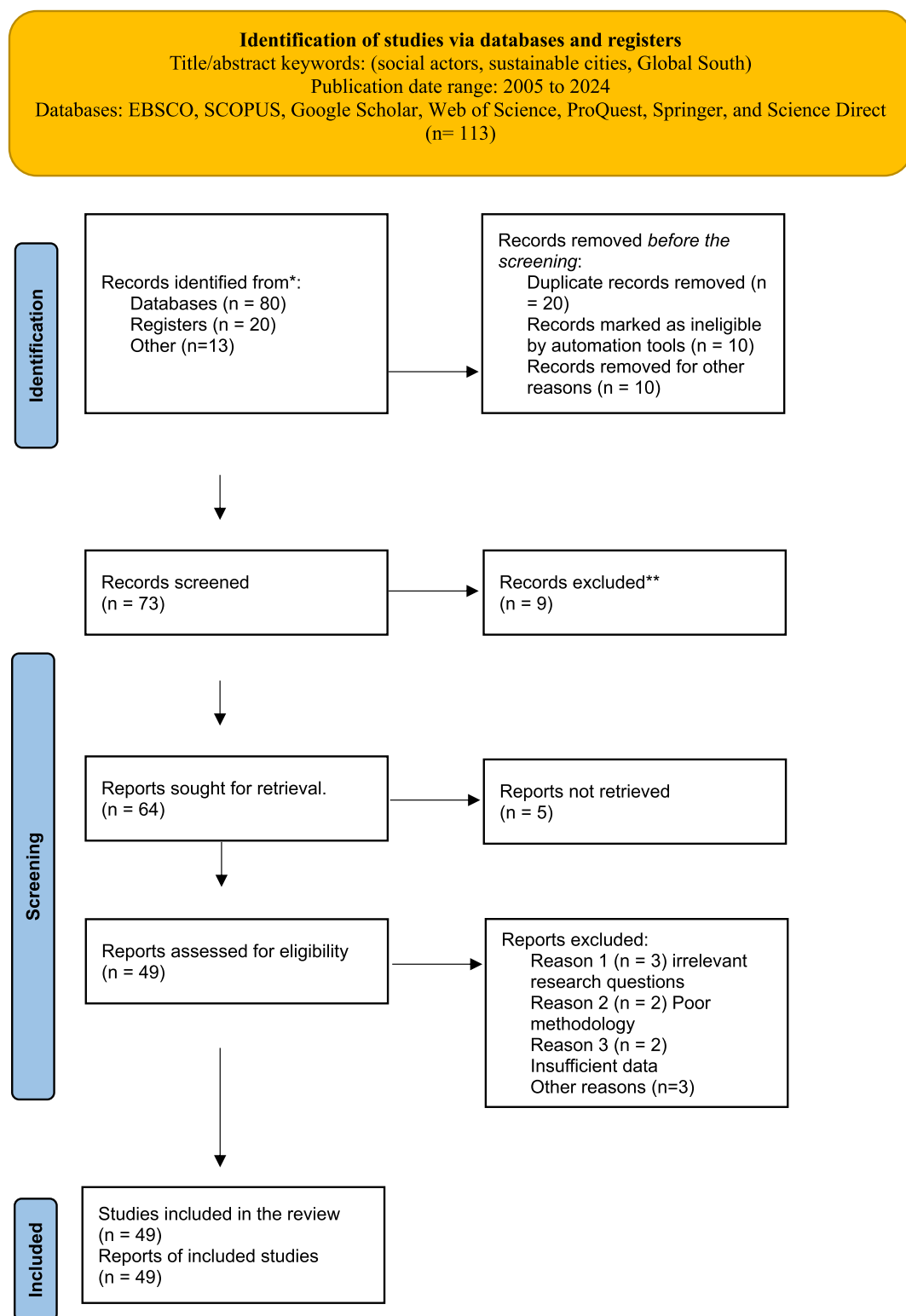


FIGURE 1

Review process. This adheres to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, ensuring a commitment to transparent reporting. Source: Reproduced from Page et al. (2021), published under CC BY 4.0.

their affiliations with various groups. This theory provides valuable insights into how social identities shape behaviors, perceptions, and interactions both within groups and about others. Gaffney and Hogg (2023) identify two fundamental aspects of SIT: (1) Self-Concept,

which highlights that individual possess a self-concept that includes personal, relational, and collective identities, with social identity playing a key role in navigating social interactions. This framework elucidates how individuals interpret social interactions through the

lenses of their personal, relational, and collective selves, leading to a comprehensive understanding of identity formation. Raising awareness about social identities and their behavioral implications is crucial in recognizing individual biases. Education equips individuals to grasp how their group memberships shape their perceptions and interactions. Scholars such as Schulte et al. (2020) emphasize that group identification fosters a sense of belonging and shared interests, which can catalyze environmental activism. This link between social identity and collective action is essential for driving significant societal change. Therefore, this paper employs Social Identity Theory to emphasize how individual identification with groups that share common interests carries considerable potential for social actors to influence governance processes. By utilizing diverse strategies, engaging in advocacy networks, and creating informal governance spaces, these actors are instrumental in navigating local dynamics and reshaping selection environments, ultimately enhancing inclusivity in urban sustainability initiatives (Verkuyten, 2021; Barnes et al., 2018). Their active participation is critical in fostering collaborative efforts, advocating for marginalized voices, and shaping policy decisions. This involvement democratizes public policy implementation, thereby advancing inclusivity and sustainability in urban regeneration initiatives, especially within underserved neighborhoods (Delgado-Baena and Sianes, 2024). (2) Group Membership entails identification with a group characterized by cognitive awareness, value connotations, and emotional attachment, all exerting influence on behaviors through established group norms (Fouzia and Salah, 2022). Researchers Scheepers and Ellemers (2019) assert that individuals derive significant aspects of their identity from group memberships, which in turn influence emotions and behaviors. Thus, Social Identity Theory emphasizes the dynamics of social categorization and the motivation for a positive social identity through group identification and comparison. According to Esposito et al. (2023), social actors play a vital role in shaping governance processes by promoting civic engagement and enhancing social cohesion.

## Conceptualizing social actors in building sustainable cities

The concept of sustainable development is being adopted globally with increasing urgency. Nations are recognizing the need for sustainable cities that prioritize improving the quality of life for local populations while simultaneously fostering economic development and preserving the environment (Rodrigues, 2018). The rapid growth of urban areas has led to a significant erosion of the human dimension in city environments, weakening critical relationships that enhance life quality. Therefore, actively pursuing strategies that elevate quality of life and facilitate the development of sustainable, humane cities is key. Integrating green spaces—such as gardens, parks, and plazas—into urban planning is essential. These spaces serve as venues for cultural, recreational, and developmental activities, transforming urban centers into vibrant social destinations. This approach not only enhances city attractiveness but also ensures balanced development across all sectors (Tessa et al., 2024). A study conducted by Véron (2010) makes it clear that sustainable urban development hinges on more than just government action. It requires an active network of governmental, market, and societal actors. This encompasses the private sector, NGOs, and local communities, all of which are essential

in shaping and executing policies. The engagement of social actors in creating sustainable cities is crucial, as it directly addresses the specific needs of the communities involved.

The Housing Code of 2009 makes it clear that the primary aim of social housing is to align with the national priority of restructuring South African society. This is pivotal for addressing structural, economic, social, and spatial dysfunctions, in line with the government's vision of fostering an economically empowered, non-racial, and integrated society within sustainable human settlements (Department of Human Settlements, 2009). In accordance with Véron (2010), it is essential for governments to recognize the diversity and context-specific dynamics of various stakeholders, particularly concerning housing issues. This understanding is crucial to advancing sustainable development in the Global South. It is crucial to acknowledge, as highlighted by Madell (2024), that most South African cities are confronted with profound and unsolvable challenges. These include staggering levels of structural unemployment, a severe shortage of adequate housing and essential services such as utilities, education, and healthcare, as well as ineffective public transport and deteriorating city management. Moreover, entrenched patterns of income, racial, and spatial inequality exacerbate these issues. These factors culminate in an overwhelming demand for housing and result in significant disparities, severely impacting the quality of life for impoverished households (Zubrzycka-Czarnecka, 2019).

Scholars like Fell and Mattsson (2021) underscore the urgent need for urban housing developers to grasp the interconnectedness of ecological and social sustainability within the framework of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). These collaborations are essential for realizing national policies and international treaties moving forward. Thus, comprehensive collaboration among all stakeholders is non-negotiable for the government to achieve the objectives outlined in the National Development Plan and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Researchers such as Al-Mumar and Albaghdadi (2023) identify multiple criteria that must be assessed to evaluate the quality of life in urban settings, including living standards, average income, lifespan, and demographic factors. Prioritizing these factors is imperative for cities to thrive and sustainably deliver essential services. Social actors play a vital role in shaping governance processes, actively influencing relationships, raising awareness, and championing diverse participation and co-design in policy formulation. This multi-actor engagement is essential for effectively tackling complex challenges and ensuring inclusivity in urban sustainability initiatives (de Geus et al., 2024). Scholars like Sobantu (2020) emphasize that the private sector must take responsibility for housing policies and actively contribute to providing adequate housing for employees. Furthermore, collaboration with the government on social housing developments is crucial for achieving integrated human settlements through resource mobilization. By fostering community engagement, promoting horizontal partnerships, and advocating for informal collaborative mechanisms, social actors significantly enhance governance processes. Their active involvement guarantees that inclusivity in urban sustainability initiatives is upheld, ensuring diverse perspectives are represented and communities are empowered in decision-making (Treija et al., 2023).

In a study conducted by Mahmoud (2024), an in-depth analysis of collaborative governance is provided in urban planning and further, provides a variety of mechanisms and instruments that can be employed in Urban Nature Plans in most cities to ensure

sustainability. The identified mechanisms can be adopted to foster inclusive implementation in collaboration with citizens and local stakeholders. Øjvind Nielsen et al. (2024) argue that the common approach to the implementation of UNPs in collaboration governance shows a top-down model of public participation. However, there are a few cases that are the opposite where the community is provided a space to participate from the preparation stage. The research further indicates that the implementations of UNPs cannot be one size fits all since the challenges that cities face are not the same. This means that strategies must be identified that are context specific to address issues to ensure sustainability. For community engagements to improve the local people should directly be influenced by their immediate surroundings. In the South African context, it is the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) that are a road map for municipalities in addressing the needs of communities. The adoption of IDPs is in line with the South African Constitution which requires communities to participate in the decision-making process to ensure active participation. The literature indicates that collaborative governance is a strategy that can be adopted to ensure shared decision-making and accountability. If embraced by all stakeholders, the goal is the capacitation of communities.

A study conducted by Mahmoud (2024) offers a decisive analysis of collaborative governance in urban planning, outlining a range of effective mechanisms and instruments that must be employed in Urban Nature Plans (UNPs) to achieve sustainability. These mechanisms are essential for fostering inclusive implementation alongside citizens and local stakeholders. Øjvind Nielsen et al. (2024) highlight that the prevalent approach to implementing UNPs within collaborative governance typically follows a top-down model of public participation. Nevertheless, there are notable examples where communities are actively engaged right from the preparation stage. The research firmly establishes that the implementation of UNPs is not a one-size-fits-all solution, as each city faces unique challenges. Therefore, it is imperative to identify strategies that are specifically tailored to address these issues and ensure sustainability. For community engagement to be truly effective, residents must be actively influenced by their immediate environments. In South Africa, the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) functions as a crucial roadmap for municipalities to address community needs. The adoption of IDPs is in strict alignment with the South African Constitution, which mandates that communities participate in decision-making processes to guarantee active involvement. Collaborative governance is a powerful strategy that can effectively facilitate shared decision-making and accountability. If adopted by all stakeholders, this approach will undoubtedly empower communities and enhance their capacity to drive meaningful change.

Through their influence, social actors facilitate collaboration, integrate human considerations into decision-making, balance goal commitment with experimental approaches, and institutionalize social sustainability. These actions further reinforce inclusivity by ensuring varied perspectives are considered throughout the urban development process (Janssen et al., 2024). Governance processes are shaped through the assertion of rights, participation in political processes, and navigation of multi-level governance structures. The complex relationships among the state, society, and institutions inform effective strategies that advocate for inclusivity in urban sustainability initiatives through strategic alliances (Donaghy and Paller, 2023).

Furthermore, as highlighted by Adelina et al. (2021), social actors have a critical role in shaping governance processes by leading and funding urban sustainability initiatives, framing environmental solutions, and driving inclusion through diverse engagement strategies. When given a chance to participate, social actors effectively tackle barriers and forge pathways for robust multi-level governance in urban settings. Ward Committees are pivotal in these processes, facilitating communication between residents and authorities, ensuring citizen engagement, and addressing local needs. Their proactive involvement builds trust, promotes accountability, and adeptly navigates regulatory challenges, ultimately resulting in more inclusive urban sustainability efforts (Boucheriba and Messali, 2022). Municipalities must prioritize the capacity building of community committees, as they are essential for addressing community needs effectively. Their engagement fosters collaboration, ensuring that urban sustainability initiatives align with local challenges and promote equitable access to urban services and resources (Adade, 2020). Social actors, as noted by Gerometta et al. (2005), play a vital role in establishing new connections, driving social innovation, and integrating previously marginalized groups into the urban development process.

## Community engagement as a strategy to address urban challenges

Vulnerable communities are disproportionately affected by unplanned urban development, and their involvement in urban planning processes has been shamefully overlooked. It is imperative for governments to implement and enforce mechanisms that ensure citizen participation, especially from vulnerable populations, in development planning and policymaking. The current absence of clear guidance for practitioners regarding the establishment of specific goals for community engagement and the selection of appropriate participatory methods is utterly unacceptable (Geekiyanage et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2024; Treija et al., 2023). Community engagement is not just important; it is essential for enhancing public welfare in urban areas. It strengthens social connections, fosters active participation, and empowers residents. Research consistently demonstrates that community engagement workshops and collaborative initiatives, such as community projects, are key drivers for solidifying communities, enhancing the urban environment, and advancing sustainable urban development (Petronienė and Juzeleniene, 2022; Adade, 2020). Acknowledging the significance of community engagement is crucial for tackling the various challenges that hinder sustainable development.

Petronienė and Juzeleniene (2022) have pinpointed critical issues that must be addressed for successful community engagement: (1) Community engagement is vital in identifying and mobilizing local resources, effectively alleviating financial constraints faced by development projects. Engaging community members ensures access to local funding and support, significantly improving project viability. (2) Diverse Community Needs: Active community engagement allows for a comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs and interests of stakeholders. This process guarantees that development projects are inclusive and equitable, addressing the specific concerns of all community groups. (3) People's Attitudes: Community engagement transforms negative attitudes toward development initiatives. By

fostering ownership and participation, community members are far more likely to support and actively contribute to projects, effectively overcoming resistance. (4) Language Barriers: Effective engagement strategies must incorporate translation services and culturally relevant communication methods to ensure that all community members can participate meaningfully. (5) Institutional Support: Strong community involvement leads to enhanced institutional backing for development projects. When community members are engaged, they are empowered to advocate for their needs, ensuring that local institutions are responsive and, consequently, enhancing project sustainability. (6) Social Capital Development: Community engagement fosters relationships and networks among residents, which is crucial for enhancing social capital. This interconnectedness is fundamental for collaborative solutions to community issues and achieving effective and sustainable development outcomes (Petronienė and Juzeleniene, 2022; Kohli, 2024).

## Public participation in the policy-making process

In implementing the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which emphasizes the promotion of participatory urban policies, civic engagement, and people-centered development approaches. The meaningful involvement and consultation of local groups, individuals, and practicing communities in decision-making processes related to urban development is not merely beneficial however, it is a necessity. These engagements reveal critical insights into who should be consulted, how to reach them, and when to do it, effectively challenging the dominance of already-empowered voices in public consultation processes (Ross, 2018). Policymakers should be able to identify the needs of the communities they are servicing and be willing to involve them in the whole process for effective implementation of the policies. Scholars such as Damanik et al. (2024) have significantly contributed to the discourse on public administration by underscoring the vital importance of community participation. The scholars identified the ongoing challenges and recommended strategies for fostering effective public engagement. By involving the community in decision-making, it becomes easy to adopt more effective and sustainable policies, thereby enhancing the overall governance framework. According to Damanik et al. (2024), engaging the public in the decision-making process not only produces better outcomes but is essential for sustainable governance.

Community participation must be recognized as a multifaceted endeavor, encompassing everything from public consultations to significant collaboration in policy formation. In public administration, enhancing public participation is essential for increasing government legitimacy and accountability. The overwhelming acknowledgment of citizen involvement as a critical element in the development and implementation of public policies is well-established (Jeong, 2022). Rey and Fortin (2023) emphasize that participatory approaches are not just desirable but necessary, as they play a pivotal role in evaluating public policies. These approaches are crucial for integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives into the evaluation process. Nonetheless, Xuan (2023) identifies significant challenges to public participation, particularly regarding capacity, representation, and power dynamics. It is imperative that local authorities not only encourage various participatory methods but also invest in the capacity-building of

communities. Effective community participation goes beyond merely urging citizens to engage; it requires substantial investments in the local skills units of municipalities. Furthermore, Malik (2023) points out potential trade-offs between public involvement and essential policy objectives, such as efficiency and timeliness.

Scholars such as Verf (2021) assert that citizen participation is increasingly recognized as a more intentional and democratic method for making policies in collaboration with citizens. However, the outcomes of such participation often fall short in terms of policy impact and inclusivity. While the debate surrounding inclusivity continues, many experts, including Livia (2023), are asserting its necessity for achieving key goals of citizen participation, such as political legitimacy and social cohesion. It is essential to create space for the inclusion of all individuals within participatory processes. To facilitate this, stakeholders must be prepared to relinquish some control in decision-making, whether in political, scientific, or technical contexts and acknowledge the access rights of all involved (Livia and Rosita, 2016). Thorn et al. (2024) highlights that transparency is a fundamental element for enhancing community participation. In response to increasing public demands for transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness, incorporating diverse voices in policymaking is crucial for building public trust and improving policy effectiveness (Xiang, 2024; Luwe et al., 2022). Therefore, governments need to communicate information about decision-making processes, policies, and outcomes in a clear and timely manner.

## Advancing urban sustainability for disadvantaged communities

Governments have made an unequivocal commitment to this critical mission under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which demands the creation of sustainable cities and resilient communities. Research by Benda (2019) shows a strong link between SDG 11 and fundamental human rights, including the right to a healthy environment, access to safe water and sanitation, and adequate housing. Yet, a significant obstacle to achieving this SDG is the entrenched discrimination encountered by vulnerable groups. Scholars consistently affirm that community-led initiatives are essential in the battle against urban inequality. These initiatives empower local communities to take charge of their own development, ensuring their specific needs and challenges are addressed decisively (Limaki, 2024). Moreover, Hutson (2011) illustrates the substantial challenges that rapid urbanization imposes on urban residents. In the United States, issues such as inefficient land use and zoning, inadequate transportation and infrastructure, a severe shortage of affordable housing, and disinvestment have drastically compromised the quality of life for low-income urban populations. However, embedded within these challenges are significant opportunities to transform the sustainability, livability, and health of poor urban communities. Countries must take urgent action to identify and implement inclusive strategies that create nurturing urban environments for low-income households. Sustainable development policies possess the undeniable potential to dramatically enhance both the environmental and economic quality of life for individuals in these communities. This challenge compels public policy and administration to manage and advance sustainable development initiatives effectively within this complex landscape (Blumenthal and Martin, 2007).

Hutson (2011) stresses that successful urban sustainability initiatives must integrate the needs and voices of the community at every stage. Engaging residents in planning and decision-making is not just valuable; it is critical for developing lasting solutions that are both sustainable and equitable. There are immense opportunities to elevate the sustainability and livability of disadvantaged urban communities. With the right strategies and policies, these communities can be radically transformed into thriving, healthier environments (Hutson, 2011). Therefore, implementing effective strategies and policies is non-negotiable for achieving sustainability and building resilient livelihoods in marginalized communities.

Fell and Mattsson (2021) clearly assert that public-private partnerships (PPPs) are a powerful mechanism for advancing urban sustainability in disadvantaged communities. These partnerships foster essential collaboration, optimize resource allocation, and drive substantial community engagement. Effective PPP models are explicitly designed to align local needs with sustainable development goals, ensuring a seamless connection between public values and private interests. The authors assert that enhancing resident participation and inclusion is crucial for the evolution of PPPs into effective frameworks that cultivate sustainable cities. Ultimately, PPPs can initiate transformative change by directly addressing the unique needs of local communities (Fell and Mattsson, 2021). Advancing urban sustainability for marginalized communities is not just necessary; it is imperative. This requires a robust, multifaceted strategy that dismantles systemic discrimination, champions community-driven initiatives, and decisively leverages sustainable development policies.

## Recommendations

### Enhanced public engagement and education

Enhancing public awareness and involvement in sustainability initiatives is not just important; it is essential for securing a sustainable future. Communities must be empowered to make informed decisions and advocate for sustainable practices within their communities by significantly improving life cycle literacy. Organizing workshops and seminars focused on participatory planning techniques is crucial for planners. These sessions provide invaluable hands-on experiences and equip participants with the practical skills necessary to effectively engage their communities. The application of Social Identity theory is pivotal in this context, as it fosters individual understanding and encourages learning from each other's best practices. Scholars such as Gaffney and Hogg (2023) underscore the urgent need to equip communities with conflict resolution skills. These skills are indispensable for navigating disagreements constructively and facilitating effective communication, ultimately reducing tensions and promoting cooperation among diverse groups. When residents take an active role in urban planning, they contribute essential insights and experiences that enable planners to pinpoint the unique needs and challenges of their communities. This inclusive approach ensures that diverse voices are heard—especially those from marginalized groups—and directly addresses social inequalities. Cultivating this sense of belonging among residents is imperative for sustainable urban development (Deep, 2023).

### Collaboration with community organizations

Partnering with local community organizations is essential for planners to gain a deep understanding of community needs and preferences. Joint training sessions with these organizations will significantly enhance mutual understanding and collaboration. The creation of sustainable cities demands the unified efforts of various social actors, each playing a critical role in urban sustainability. Government agencies, from local to national levels, are pivotal in establishing policies, providing funding, and facilitating collaboration among all stakeholders. Local governments must take the initiative to implement targeted initiatives—such as developing cycling infrastructure, promoting renewable energy projects, and establishing green building standards. Their participation in transnational networks is vital for sharing best practices and engaging in global sustainability discussions. Moreover, national governments can shape urban sustainability through comprehensive strategies, tax incentives, and legislation focused on energy efficiency. By adopting specific policies and standards that align with local needs and goals, both national and local governments can reinforce sustainable urban development. When all stakeholders work collectively, government can achieve significant progress toward more sustainable urban environments.

### Evolution of public engagement tools

The advancement of public engagement tools, particularly through digital platforms, has created unprecedented opportunities for elevating citizen participation in governance. These tools are essential for fostering meaningful interactions between the public and decision-makers and promoting an inclusive approach to urban planning and public service design. Research by Postert et al. (2022) underscores the necessity of using technology to engage underrepresented groups in participatory processes. Prioritizing marginalized populations in our sustainability efforts through technology is not just important; it is imperative. City officials must explore a diverse array of public engagement tools and technologies that empower planners to effectively involve communities. Resources aimed at utilizing surveys, social media, and interactive platforms are indispensable. The advance into the digital age, leveraging technology and innovation is crucial for supporting social actors in constructing sustainable cities and enhancing the quality of life for underserved communities. Digital advancements, including e-governance solutions and open data initiatives, play an invaluable role in enriching public engagement. These technologies streamline processes, improve accessibility, and actively encourage citizen participation, which are all critical for driving positive change in public service delivery across various governmental entities. Smart city initiatives, harnessing digital applications, must address key concerns such as safety, health, and transportation, ultimately improving community quality of life. Through data analytics and innovative technologies, these initiatives can optimize resource allocation, enhance public safety with surveillance and predictive measures, and improve urban infrastructure management.

## Sustainable regulatory and policy frameworks

To effectively promote sustainable practices, municipal decision-makers must prioritize the development and implementation of robust regulatory frameworks that encourage initiatives such as the use of recycled materials, energy-efficient technologies, and sustainable construction methods. Local and national governance structures are instrumental in advancing urban sustainability and poverty reduction efforts. Local governments have the power to make significant progress by adopting eco-friendly practices, enhancing walkability in cities, and promoting responsible resource usage. Their initiatives can drive community engagement and ensure that urban development plans are inclusive and responsive to the needs of residents (Barnsard, 2022).

On a national level, governments must provide essential support through comprehensive strategies, legislative measures, financial backing, and the enforcement of regulations that empower local governments to achieve their sustainability and poverty reduction goals. The collaboration between local and national governance is crucial for establishing a cohesive and effective framework to address complex urban challenges. Implementing relevant regulatory frameworks will empower leadership by shaping sustainable development governance, fostering a clear vision, building commitment, engaging stakeholders, instilling a culture of sustainability, adopting strategic approaches, and ensuring effective coordination and communication among all involved parties. Therefore, it is imperative for governments to prioritize sustainable development frameworks as guiding principles for all governmental structures, paving the way for a more sustainable and responsive future.

## Conclusion

The involvement of social actors in the formulation of public policies and decision-making processes is not only vital; it is essential for effective governance. Various stakeholders, including civil society organizations and NGOs/CBOs, play a pivotal role in fostering collaborations with municipalities through service partnerships. These actors significantly influence the policy-making landscape by engaging in advocacy, stimulating public discourse, and establishing norms that guide political behavior. Their active participation within communities is critical for developing policies that genuinely reflect societal needs and values. Such engagement with the relevant actors not only drives progress but also enhances transparency and inclusivity within the policymaking framework.

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Future research must focus on building trust and legitimacy among stakeholders to ensure long-term cooperation. To effectively construct sustainable cities, it is essential that all stakeholders are granted meaningful opportunities to participate in the public policy process, influencing agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. This inclusive approach guarantees that a diverse array of perspectives is considered, ultimately leading to the development of public policies that are both effective and beneficial for society.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

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## Conflict of interest

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